The Toronto Blessing And The Laughing Revival

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Something happened on January 10, 1994, at a Vineyard Church near the Pearson International Airport in Toronto, that was unique in the history of Christianity. While some point back to somewhat similar phenomena during the Welsh Revivals, Cane Ridge Revivals (1800-1801), Charles Finney (1800s), and even the Great Awakening (1734-47), all of these pale in comparison to the claims of the "Laughing Revival" that received its energy, if not origin, on that cold day in Canada. Supporters say that on this occasion the Holy Spirit was poured out on that small congregation, resulting in spontaneous, uncontrollable laughter. Thus began a "revival" that continues to this day and has impacted churches throughout the world. Hundreds of thousands of visitors, including thousands of pastors, have attended the services at the Toronto Airport Vineyard (now called the Airport Christian Fellowship) in hopes of catching and transporting the spirit of this revival. And it seems to be working. Churches across the globe are claiming similar experiences which, in addition to "holy laughter," include shaking, making animal noises, swooning, and being stuck in "Holy Ghost glue." It has been reported by some that up to seven thousand churches in Great Britain alone have experienced something pertaining to the Holy Laughter Revival.

Rodney Howard-Browne, a South African minister associated with the Word of Faith Movement, is the recognized "Father" of holy laughter. He claims to have had his first experience with this phenomena in 1979, while challenging God to "touch me" or he was going "to come up there and touch You." God apparently responded by causing him to feel as if his body was on fire and he broke out in uncontrollable laughter (see Howard-Browne's book, *The Touch of God*). In 1989, while preaching in New York State, his congregation fell under the same power. Soon Howard-Browne began influencing others, but on a small scale. Then, while preaching at Carpenter's Home Church in Lakeland, Florida, in 1993, laughter in the Spirit once again broke out bringing Howard-Browne out of obscurity. One of his disciples was Pastor Randy Clark from St. Louis, Missouri.

It was Clark (who had already experienced strange phenomenons in his church) who preached the revival sermon in Toronto that ignited the whole movement. The Revival has since spread like wildfire, especially in Vineyard and Charismatic circles, and in recent years has penetrated all kinds of denominations. Howard-Browne, who continues to be a leader of this movement, calls himself a "Holy Ghost Bartender" who dispenses the "new wine" of joy that leads to people being "drunk in the Spirit." He claims to find the biblical base for his teaching in Acts 2, at the day of Pentecost. But a careful study of that text does not reveal anything like what is happening today. The apostles were not laughing uncontrollably, they were not barking like dogs, they were not stuck to the floor in Holy Ghost glue, they were not being "slain in the Spirit." They simply preached the gospel and their listeners heard it in their own language.

Recently the Association of Vineyard Fellowships expelled the Airport Vineyard Fellowship from its association for "going over the edge." Even the Vineyard has recognized that the Revival has gone too far and is now trying to distance itself. This is both encouraging and ironic. It is encouraging to see that the Vineyard has some experiential boundaries that even it will not cross; and it's ironic to see a denomination, that bases so much of what it does and believes on extra-biblical experiences, draw a line in the sand and judge some experiences as extreme. What criteria the Vineyard could possibly use to do this is unknown. A criterion unused by either group is found in Isaiah 8:16,19-20: *"Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples . . . And when they say to you, 'Consult the mediums and the spiritists who whisper and mutter,' should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn."*

John Arnott, the pastor of the Airport Vineyard Fellowship, tells his followers that they are not to even entertain the thought that they might become involved in any kind of counterfeit revival. Yet, the apostle John warned us to *"Test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world"* (I John 4:1). "This warning is relevant today, as Christianity is undergoing a paradigm shift of major proportions — a shift from faith to feelings, from fact to fantasy, and from reason to esoteric revelation" (Hank Hanegraaff, *Counterfeit Revival,* p. 9).

Experiences

One of Howard-Browne's books has a section titled "Holy Ghost Glue." In it he recounts the story of a wealthy woman who got "stuck" in the spirit. As Howard-Browne tells it:

She was lying there from noon until 1:30 . . . At 1:30, she tried to get up. She wanted to get up. She couldn't. All she could do was flap her hands. So she was lying there flapping away — flap, flap, flap, flap . . . 2:30, 3:30, 4:30 . . . At 4:30 the woman was still saying, "I can't get up. I'm stuck to the floor."

She flapped so long that, as Howard-Browne put it, he ended up "walking out on the Holy Spirit":

> I turned to the pastor and said, “Look, I haven’t had either breakfast or lunch. It’s 4:30. I’m not stuck and you’re not stuck. These people are going to stay here with her, so let’s go have a meal before the night service.” The ushers told us later that at 6 o’clock the woman finally peeled herself off the carpet. Then it took her an hour to crawl from the center of the church auditorium to the side wall. She had been stuck to the floor for six hours! (*Manifesting the Holy Spirit*, pages 26,27).
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> When Randy Clark preached at the Airport Vineyard, the pastor claimed that “almost 80 percent of the people were on the floor.” “It was like an explosion. We saw people literally being knocked off their feet by the Spirit of God. . . . Others shook and jerked. Some danced, some laughed. Some lay on the floor as if dead for hours. People cried and shouted” (*The Father’s Blessing*, by John Arnott, pages 71,72).

Prophecies and Revelations

Jim Ryle, Vineyard pastor and Promise Keeper board member, is on the cutting edge of the current charismatic revivals. He claims to be a prophet who serves as a good example of today’s claims of extra biblical revelations. He said he once dreamed that he “was literally inside the Lord.”

> And from the vantagepoint of “seeing through the eyes of Jesus,” he was enabled to unravel myriad mysteries for the people of God. As a classic case in point, God revealed to Ryle His purpose for placing a special anointing of music upon the Beatles (despite the fact that none of them were committed to Christ). As the Almighty allegedly articulated, “It was My purpose to bring forth, through music, a worldwide revival that would usher in the move of My Spirit in bringing men and women to Christ.” Because the Beatles used their anointing for Satan’s kingdom instead, Ryle says the Lord lifted His anointing, “kept it unto Himself and is about to release it again” (see *Counterfeit Revival*, p. 69).

On August 22, 1989, the Almighty (supposedly) gave Ryle a dream about football. In the dream, Ryle saw “something like an energy field” encircling the University of Colorado Buffaloes football team. He then heard a voice that said, “This will be their golden season!”

> The next day Ryle shared the dream as well as its interpretation with Bill McCartney, who was then the Colorado coach, and who later founded the national Christian men’s group Promise Keepers. Ryle said, “The Lord will now fulfill promises which He has made to you by empowering the players with His Spirit. This will be the golden season!” At the end of the golden season, before the championship game, Ryle says, “I felt certain that we would win and be crowned the national champions of college football — we were already firmly locked in the number one position in the polls. I was *sure* that we would win; my confidence was unshakable!”

Minutes before the national championship game, however, the Lord gave Ryle a tragic revelation through a female buffalo named Ralphie. Via the omen of Ralphie’s broken horn, God revealed that the power of His Spirit had departed from the team. This time, however, Ryle kept the revelation to himself until after the game.

As he stood stunned in the stadium, contemplating Colorado's crushing 21 to 6 loss to Notre Dame, the Holy Spirit told Ryle to turn to Isaiah 21:6: *For thus the Lord says to me, "Go, station the lookout, let him report what he sees."* While the content of Isaiah 21:6 has no correspondence to football games, Ryle says, "My curiosity was awakened."

After the tragic ending to the Buffaloes' golden season, God revealed to Ryle that he would "reach out His hand a second time" (Isa. 11:11). And, sure enough, the following year, the Colorado Buffaloes were again pitted against Notre Dame in the national championship of college football. Astonishingly, the omen was confirmed for Ryle by the season win-loss-tie record (11-1-1), which matched the passage (Isa. 11:11) that the Holy Spirit had prompted him to consult (ibid. p. 70-71).

In a message titled "Receiving the Spirit's Power," Counterfeit Revival leader Carol Arnott (John's wife) claims she had a conversation with the Holy Spirit. During the dialogue, the spirit that spoke with her communicated sorrow over being separated from Jesus: "You know, the Father, and Jesus and I have been together for all of eternity. But when Jesus went back to heaven to be with God the Father, I came to earth." And He said, "I am so lonely for Jesus." He said, "So that when people really, really love Jesus, and really honor Him, and really worship Him," He said, "I love to be around those kinds of people.". . He misses Jesus, and He misses the Father (ibid. p. 111).

Rarely is the self-gratifying orientation of Counterfeit Revivalists more prominent than in John Arnott's book *The Father's Blessing*. In a section titled "Jesus Wants a Love Affair with You," Arnott describes how Jesus appeared to a woman and fulfilled all her fantasies. Jesus laughed with the woman as together they ran around with arms stretched out like airplanes; Jesus lay on the ground with the woman and played Legos; then Jesus played with her hair and met her deepest needs and desires (pages 20-22).

A good sampling of the strange and incredible experiences being claimed by followers of this revival can be found in John Arnott's book.

Bizarre claims from *The Father's Blessings*:

> A delightful woman came to Toronto from Europe. She came from an extremely theological and intellectual background — “too much thinking,” she said. While under God’s power she had a vision. Much to her surprise, Jesus took her through events of her childhood, and they relived them together.
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> This woman used to play soccer, and Jesus told her gently that she took the glory for herself. So she wept and repented, then they played soccer together. She laughed and laughed at His long robe, then she asked Him to be the goalkeeper. He was so strong, He knocked all the balls away. But then He let her have a goal, and she laughed some more.
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> Then Jesus told her she always acted like a boy. She said this was true because her father wanted a boy, and it hurt her. But Jesus showed her that He wanted her to be a girl. She explains that she saw, like a movie before her eyes, the yard she used to play in as a child. She had a pretty flowered dress on, and they danced together, and her hair blew in the wind. Jesus told her, “You know, forever — I wanted you as a girl.” And she cried and cried. “It was so wonderful because He planned me to be a girl. It was so beautiful.”

Another evening Jesus showed her herself as a baby, and He tickled her. She laughed and laughed, and baby noises came out of her. Another time, she was one year old. She was holding a toy, but she couldn’t play with it because she didn’t know how. And she looked into the eyes of Jesus and asked Him to explain how to play with this toy. And He took time and told her (p. 123-124).

> Carol (Arnott’s wife) has often prayed for me (Arnott), and I would stand there trying to receive from God, yet not feeling anything. I would say, “Honey, is the Holy Spirit flowing in?”
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> She would say, “Yes, just receive.” Then she would say, “Whoops, where did you go?”
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> “What do you mean?”
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> “Well, you went somewhere, and God’s anointing for you came back on me.”
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> Some of you who minister know what that feels like. When you are praying for someone else and they do not receive, the anointing comes back to you and you just about fall over — either you or the person who is helping you.
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> I asked Carol why I didn’t receive, and she told me that I was trying to stay in control. I argued with her, but she was more convincing: “You will not surrender; you will not give yourself to God” (p. 125).

(Carol Arnott gives this vision, which could have been taken right out of a Disney movie.)

> The scene changed, and I was walking, holding His arm. I kept looking around thinking, “Gee, I don’t recognize this place. I wonder where I am? This doesn’t look familiar at all.” Then I happened to look down, and I thought, “Oh, it’s gold! Oh, my goodness, I am walking on the streets of gold. This is heaven! I’m the bride of Christ. I am marrying Jesus.” This is the wedding day. Lord, this is incredible. I was standing in an open spot when Jesus walked up and said, “Carol, may I have the first dance?” I thought, “Oh, no, I can’t dance. My wedding veil is too long.” As soon as I thought that, out of nowhere came cardinals and blue jays — all these little birds — and they picked up my veil, and I danced with Jesus (p. 164, 165).

Arnott writes:

It is no coincidence that we have seen people prophetically acting like lions, oxen, eagles and even warriors. In Steve Witt’s church in St. Johns, New Brunswick, I saw all four of those manifestations happening at the same time — the ox, the eagle, the lion and the man (warrior). The lion and eagle manifestations accompanied prophesying. The man who was acting out the part of the warrior had both hands gripped together around the hilt of a sword, and he was swinging it. These warrior actions give the observer a real feel of battlefield action. The people who were doing this were mostly credible pastors or leaders. I was astonished but sensed the awesome presence of God.

> One lady who played the keyboard and weighed about 115 pounds was on all fours, snorting and pawing the ground like an angry ox or bull. It was obvious that she was surprised and a bit frightened by what was happening, but at the same time she seemed determined to follow the Spirit’s leading (p. 178).

It is almost impossible to keep up on the bizarre claims coming out of Toronto. Fortunately (?) for us the Toronto Christian Fellowship has an excellent Web site (www.tacf.org) complete with live and taped videos of their services and the most recent manifestations. Lately the church is claiming that many at their meetings, both at home and in South Africa, are receiving gold fillings in the teeth. What a dental plan!

Perhaps a quote by Howard Rodney-Browne might help us understand how and why “Christians” can be so gullible: “I’d rather be in a church where the devil and the flesh are manifesting than in a church where nothing is happening because people are too afraid to manifest anything. Every time there is a move of God, a few people will get excited, go overboard, and get in the flesh. Other believers will get upset, saying that couldn’t be of God. Don’t worry about it either. Rejoice because at least something is happening . . . If someone comes in the meeting, rolls around on the floor, laughs in the Holy Spirit, and does it in the flesh, at least he’s not getting drunk or taking dope” (*No Laughing Matter*, p. 66). In contrast A.W. Tozer takes the biblical position: “Any of it [teaching] that is good is in the Word of God, and any that is not in the Word of God is not good. I am a Bible Christian and if an archangel with a wingspread as broad as a constellation shining like the sun were to come and offer me some new truth, I’d ask him for a reference. If he could not show me where it is found in the Bible, I would bow him out and say, ‘I’m awfully sorry, you don’t bring any references with you’” (ibid. p. 67).